

Upcycling can work wonders... up to a point

By Vitaliy Soloviy



Take a piece of trash and turn it into something valuable. It's a simple idea that can change the way we think about resources and waste with far-reaching consequences for the planet.

The concept was first popularized by early visionaries of the circular economy such as Gunter Pauli and William McDonough decades ago to support materials reuse for creating products with higher economic value. It was promoted as a powerful antidote to downcycling (conventional recycling), which destroys the value of the product to create materials that usually have lower quality and a narrower range of applications.

These days a few distinct forms of upcycling coexist, but it still boils to one simple idea: create new value where it was once lost.

THE THREE ROADS TO UPCYCLING

Many of the people to benefit most from the concept are artists. Add upcycled to your artwork description and recognition is almost guaranteed. Recent years have seen a splash of "upcycled" products with ubiquitous health, aesthetic and environmental properties flooding Pinterest and the market.

Lucky for us, cases where upcycling enthusiasts got it right don't fall short either.

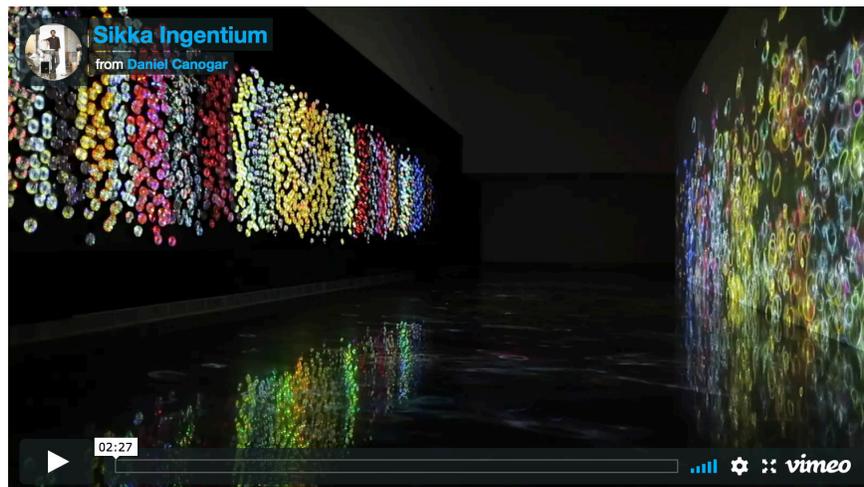
Take cardboard. A package for your cereals? A box from the new TV? Take it further. Google Cardboard and home projectors are great ways to upcycle your pizza box that has been left untainted by grease.

And it certainly doesn't end here, as artists and designers are upcycling cardboard into everything from bikes to furniture pieces and lamps. The pinnacle of this creativity might be beautiful sculptures by James Lake, featured below.



Enthusiasts also manage to turn old tin cans into effective rocket stoves for camping, and some even build passive houses powered by solar energy and made largely by using upcycled materials.

Old glass bottles can also be turned into new exotic plates, wine corks can become portraits, slippers can be artfully recrafted into toys and sculptures and even old CDs can be turned into meditative installations about the contemporary world, such as those created by Daniel Canogar.



What ties all of these together? The original material or product retains part of its shape or other visible qualities, so you can easily recognize it in the new product. But this is not the only way to go about it.

A more commercial strand of upcycling dives deep down to the raw structure of the material to do further wonders outside the original applications. Sneakers made from ocean trash and valuable carbon black upcycled from old tires are probably the most vivid examples. Hopefully, we will still see more of those on the market sometime soon.

Finally, the last and rarest form of upcycling is about getting the material as close to its original form as possible, often reversing the original process. Carbon-negative furniture that traps emissions back into solid form and turning carbon dioxide back into coal are exciting developments but these are still rare cases of how the approach works.

With all the fervor about those transformations, can upcycling solve our waste problem? Having learned to sort our waste perfectly, will we never have to worry about it again? Sadly, upcycling is just

part of the answer.

SEEING THE FOREST FOR THE TREES

Upcycling can help us clean up the mess we've made, but it will never bring back the lives, species, and ecosystems that have been sacrificed for human profit.

One could never upcycle a dead wolf or a dead deer. Ecosystems and living beings are far worth more than just their value for the economy, and that is why upcycling doesn't tell the whole story.

Even with circular designs becoming a regular part of doing business, forever increasing our efficiency through transforming nature won't help to preserve it. It's not only about upcycling something to create a higher value. There won't be any value on the planet if we destroy it in the pursuit for profit because its pristine form wasn't valuable enough.

As much as anything, this is about re-configuring our relationships with the living world and preventing the damage before it's made in the first place. Only then will all our pursuits for creating beauty and value out of scarce resources start to make sense.